

TWO LIVES CUT SHORT - THE FAMILIES OF 2 BOYS KILLED IN A DRUG ROBBERY IN THIS HOUSE WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THEY WERE YOUNGSTERS WITH LOVING HEARTS AND BRIGHT FUTURES

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Sunday, April 15, 2007

Author: RUBY L. BAILEY and BEN SCHMITT, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

The police arrived around 11 p.m. Earl Herron led them to the bodies.

On the living room floor of the house on Mansfield in Detroit were Darren Johnson, 11, and Orlando Herron, 13 - Earl's younger brother. Both shot in the head. Both lying in their own blood.

The boys were slain Feb. 23, police said, in a botched attempt to rob their cousin, 23-year-old Ronell Thompson, of drugs and money. Thompson, shot three times, survived.

But the horror of the children's slayings soon was buried under the fallout from investigative leaks about why the boys might have been targeted: Were they drug runners, working for their cousin? Had they stolen money from other drug dealers, who retaliated?

Top police brass publicly rejected both theories. Investigators say they still do not know why the boys were shot while others in the house were spared. For the families, the damage was done.

"I really couldn't believe all that was being said," Orlando's mother, Yvonne Lockhart, 36, told the Free Press. "I don't have anything to hide. My son just was over at his cousin's house. He was over there for winter break. That was it."

During an interview at her home, Allyson Howard's voice was a near-whisper, her eyes wet with tears, as she spoke of her son, Darren. An urn with his ashes sits atop the living room mantel with a Happy Birthday sticker attached by his 6-year-old sister, Armani. He was killed a few hours shy of his 12th birthday.

"How can people be so heartless like this?" said Howard, 31. "You just shot them - for what?"

The day had started as a simple outing at Thompson's west side home - a winter break visit to get haircuts, play video games, eat coneys and hang out. Thompson, who often cut family members' hair, was a big kid himself, relatives said, and he had a big draw - a Sony PlayStation 3.

But Thompson also had a life adults in the families insist they never knew existed. Only later, the boys' mothers said, would they learn that some of their children had known for months about Thompson's drug dealing.

Six people have been charged with first-degree murder in the boys' deaths and are awaiting the continuation of their preliminary hearing on May 14.

Lockhart, Howard and other relatives, meanwhile, want Darren and Orlando to be remembered as the loving kids they knew. And they want to tell the stories that were not told when they died: the stories of unrealized potential, the inexplicable tragedy of lives cut short.

Darren was in only fifth grade, but he'd already mapped out his life. The day he died, he was looking forward to his birthday. A party and a new pair of Air Jordan basketball shoes awaited him.

Orlando, a Barry Sanders wannabe, planned to head home that evening to be with his siblings, play more video games and maybe talk to a girl on the phone.

"Y'all took two lives of ours," said LaChenna Herron-Ray, 34, whose son Jayvon Scarber also was in the house on Mansfield that night. "Two babies that didn't have nothing to do with nothing. Just there to have fun."

Orlando: Laid-back and playful

They called him O. He had a megawatt smile and bright eyes.

"He just brightened the whole room," said Herron-Ray, his aunt. Orlando wanted to be a pro-football running back. His favorite number was 20, the same one worn by former Detroit Lion Barry Sanders.

He was born into a large, tight-knit family - the fifth of six children of Lockhart and Corey Herron Sr. The pair have been together for more than 20 years.

Orlando was so quiet that family members said it was easy to forget he was in a room and so laid-back it was hard to get him to go places. He lived for video games.

"You had to have a PS3 to get him out of the house," said his cousin Ebony Montgomery, 29.

When he left home for any length of time, it was usually for family trips with his siblings, often chaperoned by aunts or grandparents. He joined his aunt Hope Cotton and her three children on trips to Florida, Tennessee and amusement parks, including Cedar Point.

The cousins were close because they "were all raised together," Cotton said. "You would rarely see one without the others."

At 13, Orlando was starting to attract girls. He paid particular attention to his hair, trying to cultivate the waves the kids called 360s, a pattern that swirls 360 degrees.

Coming home from her job as a warehouse club cashier, Lockhart often found Orlando on the phone with one particular girl or playing video games.

"Did you do your homework?" Lockhart said she'd ask. If the answer was no, she'd tell him, "Get off the phone."

He was a seventh-grader at Brenda Scott Middle School in Detroit and known for his playfulness, a quality that endeared him to his teachers and classmates.

"He was well-loved by his class," said Atress Askew, his English teacher.

After school, he'd walk every day with his cousin, Jeremy Johnson, 14, who was in the eighth grade at the school, to Jeremy's house. They'd play video games until it was time for Orlando to go home.

"We just clowned around," said Jeremy, one of Cotton's children.

LaKia Fields, 13, said she could always turn to Orlando for advice. They lived on the same street for four years, before Orlando and his family moved, and still talked daily.

"He was just somebody I could talk to and get good advice from," LaKia said. "He was just a good listener. He was a fun person to talk on the phone with. He always kept me laughing."

More than anything, there was a sweetness about Orlando, said his maternal grandmother, Yvette Lockhart, 59.

Of her grandchildren, "He was the only one who would just walk up to an adult and hug them," Yvette Lockhart said. "He was always polite, always a smile on his face."

Darren: Ambitious and talented

Darren Johnson Jr. had plans. He'd graduate from high school in 2014, attend the University of Florida, become a teacher, get married, have kids and play in the NBA.

He was on his way. He'd recently gained some height and his thin frame was filling out.

"He thought he was cut," said his stepfather, DaShaan Warren, a WJLB disc jockey. "He was always flexing his muscles."

At a 2006 car show, he met Detroit Piston Rasheed Wallace and told him he intended to take Wallace down.

"He said, 'When I get in the NBA, I'm gonna block your shot,' " Warren said.

Darren was excelling at Coolidge Intermediate School in Ferndale - so much so that he was on track to be promoted from fifth to sixth grade after winter recess. He'd just made the honor roll and was described as extremely popular with classmates.

"He really worked hard in class," said Darren's fourth-grade teacher, Linda Gostomski. "The kids really liked him, especially the girls."

He also loved to write. As part of a school assignment, Darren laid out his plans in a paper entitled "I Want to Be a Teacher."

"I will get married and have a family, so I can play with my kids," he wrote. He went on to detail his plan to get an apartment and noted: "You have to be responsible and you have to persevere."

In a letter of appreciation to Gostomski, he said: "I learned that if you do good things, good things happen. My goal in life is to be a good person and never do wrong things."

And on Mother's Day 2006, he wrote to his mother: "I love you. I will love you for who you are."

But mostly, Darren "was just a typical, active kid that liked to play," Howard said.

He loved spending time with his father, Darren Johnson Sr., and played mostly with his seven siblings, and his cousins, said Howard, who owns a salon.

Howard and Johnson Sr. split up several years ago.

"He just last year was able to spend the night at one of his friends' homes," his mother said.

Darren could cook Hamburger Helper and loved anything sweet. He also loved his mom's cooking. "Macaroni and cheese - that was his favorite," she said.

He also liked to draw, especially pictures of basketball shoes like Nikes and Air Jordans.

By winter break, Darren was looking forward to his 12th birthday party, set for Joe Dumars' Fieldhouse in Shelby Township, the sports center owned by the Detroit Pistons' president.

"The last thing he said to me was, 'Don't forget my birthday,' " said Gostomski, whose classroom was right across from Darren's. "We both had February birthdays."

On Feb. 23, the day before he would have turned 12, Darren repeatedly called relatives, asking for birthday money that would get him closer to a new pair of Air Jordans.

Excited about the coming day, he also called his mother. He was at his cousin's house, playing video games.

It was exactly 5:07 p.m., she recalled.

"That would be my last time talking to him," Howard said.

(SIDEBARS)

LOVED ONES SAY GOOD-BYE

Tributes to Orlando Herron, 13, and Darren Johnson Jr., 11, delivered at their funerals in March.

Heavenly child, smile upon me.

Heavenly child, let my heart be

At rest with this horrible tragedy.

Sometimes I cry, sometimes I smile

At thoughts of you, my heavenly child.

Somehow I plan on not crying today

But thoughts of you seem to get in my way.

Most times, thoughts of you make me smile.

I could just think of being with you,

My heavenly child.

I love you, my sweet baby.

I pray that my heart won't go crazy.

Again, I say I love you, my sweet baby.

Be at peace now.

And smile upon me, my heavenly child.

Love ... Mom and Daddy

- Written by Jasmine Lockhart, Orlando Herron's cousin

When I first laid my eyes on you, I knew you were my heart. Now that you're gone, life seems so hard to move on without you. You were the life that was always shining within me. You were my pride, my joy, my heart, my son, and most of all my shadow, and I will always love you.

- Darren Johnson Sr.

My love for you will never stray; you will never leave my heart! I love you so much. ... For the short time we shared together, you will always be in my heart. I love you, Darren, my only son! I will love you and miss you always and forever!!

- Allyson Howard, Darren Johnson Jr.'s mother

"He was a fun person to talk on the phone with. He always kept me laughing."

LaKia Fields, a friend who said she could always turn to Orlando Herron for advice.

"He really worked hard in class. The kids really liked him, especially the girls."

Linda Gostomski, Darren Johnson's teacher last year, when he was in fourth grade.

Contact RUBY L. BAILEY at 313-222-6651 or rbailey@freepress.com.

ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION:

DARREN JOHNSON JR. Darren, 11, was a fifth-grader on the honor roll at Coolidge Intermediate School in Ferndale. He had his sights set on playing in the NBA and also wanted to be a teacher.

CAPTIONWRITER: ORLANDO HERRON A seventh-grader at Brenda Scott Middle School in Detroit, Orlando, 13, loved video games and Detroit Lions great Barry Sanders. He was especially close to his cousins.

MEMO: CHILDREN IN THE CROSS FIRE;SPECIAL REPORT;PART 1;SIDEBARS
ATTACHED

DISCLAIMER: THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION MAY DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM THE
PRINTED ARTICLE

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS; NEWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: Darren Johnson; Orlando Herron;homicide; juvenile; multiple; Detroit; drug; major story; series

Record Number: dfp0000416928

Copyright (c) Detroit Free Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.